RUSSIAN AND/OR YIDDISH TERMS

valenki: Knee-length felt boots for winter wear.

kolkhoz: A collective farm of the former USSR

gulag: Forced labor camp in the former USSR

taiga: Swampy coniferous forest of Siberia beginning where the tundra ends.

zeks: Prisoners in the gulags.

kasha: A mush made from coarse cracked buckwheat, barley, millet, or wheat.

oprichniki: Member of an imperial Russian police force; Ivan the Terrible’s palace guards

kulak: Rich peasants who were considered oppressors by the communists and who were penalized with fines or the confiscation of their property.

Tartar: A native inhabitant of Tartary of Mongolic or Turkic origin; a person of irritable, violent, or intractable temper.

THE GULAG SYSTEM

One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich takes place in a “special” camp run by the Chief Administration of Corrective Labor Camps and Settlements, better known by the Russian acronym: GULAG. The new rulers of Russia after the violent overthrow of the Czars dealt very harshly with their former, as well as with their new, political adversaries, and, rather than sending their enemies to prison, they began sentencing offenders to “corrective labor” soon after the revolution of 1917. In the following years, concentration camps were built and were combined with corrective labor camps in Siberia, under the administration of the secret police. It is estimated that by 1929, there were already more than 1 million prisoners in these camps, mainly for political reasons.

The establishment of the Five-Year Plans for the economic reconstruction of the Soviet Union created heavy demands for workers to achieve this drive toward changing the Soviet Union from an essentially agricultural society to an industrial society, and it was difficult to find willing and qualified workers for the construction of canals, railroads, highways, and large industrial centers. Thus, from 1929 on, the Soviet rulers began to depend more and more on forced labor. There were hardly any traditional jail terms handed out any longer; instead, criminals and political enemies were sent to labor camps. These sentences, initially for three-year terms, were based mainly on convictions for violations of the infamous Article 58 of the 1926 Criminal Code (see the essay on Article 58).

The first large wave of forced laborers consisted mainly of kulaks, disowned farmers who had resisted collectivization, but soon religious believers of all
denominations, members of minority groups and nations, socialists, and engineers (who failed to perform their assigned industrial tasks and were classified as industrial saboteurs) followed them to the camps. It is estimated that in 1940, over 13,000,000 (thirteen million) people slaved in these forced labor camps. In 1937, when many Russians had believed that an amnesty would be declared to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Revolution, Stalin instead increased the length of the sentences from ten years to fifteen and twenty years, a procedure which was repeated for the thirtieth anniversary of the Revolution, when the twenty-five-year sentences became standard, and ten-year terms were reserved for juveniles.

During World War II, many soldiers believed to be responsible for the initial Red Army defeats were sent to these camps—as were soldiers like Ivan Denisovich, who had allowed himself to be taken prisoner, and men like Solzhenitsyn who had made critical remarks about Stalin or the Communist Party, and many civilians who had lived "in contact with" the enemy during the Nazi occupation. After the war, they were joined by soldiers who had had contact with the Allies, now the enemy. Captain Buynovsky, whose crime was that he had been assigned as a liaison officer to the British Navy and had received a commendation for his services, is one such example in One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich. In addition, members of former independent countries like Latvia, Lithuania, and the Ukraine, all of whom were now satellite republics of the USSR, as well as other ethnic and national minorities, were interned in these labor camps in large numbers.

Solzhenitsyn describes the history, the methods, and the structure of these forced labor camps in great detail in his long, multi-volume work, The Gulag Archipelago. While Article 58 was repealed in 1958 in the course of a complete revision of the Penal Code, Solzhenitsyn maintains that the GULAG still exists and has, with the addition of the sentences to psychiatric clinics, grown even more vicious.

(Source for GULAG System: Cliff’s Notes)